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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000650

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SUBJECT: BAHRAIN REACTS ANGRILY TO IRANIAN TERRITORIAL
CLAIM ON BAHRAIN

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reasons: 1.4 (B)(D)

¶1. (C) Summary. A statement by a Khamenei associate reasserting a claim that Bahrain is a province of Iran has generated a spate of angry denunciations in Bahrain. The statement said that Bahrain had been separated from Iran by an illegal agreement between the Shah and the US/UK governments. This is reportedly the first time since independence that a senior Iranian has made such a territorial claim on Bahrain. Amid public calls for a cutback in relations, the Foreign Ministry called in the Iranian charge d'affaires to protest, and Iran's FM is expected to visit Bahrain July 13 to discuss the issue. Sunni and Shia leaders alike have denounced the statement, and the press has been full of angry front-page articles and editorials. The statement hit a particularly sensitive spot for Bahrain's Sunnis, and highlights local jitteriness at a time of heightened sectarian tensions in the region. At the same time, the government probably does not mind having the opportunity to drive home the point that its concerns about Iran (and implicitly Shia) are grounded in reality. End summary.

¶2. (U) A recent statement by the editor of the Iranian daily Kayhan, Hussain Shariatmadari, alleging that Bahrain is the 14th province of Iran, has set off a firestorm in Bahrain. The statement, which was reprinted in the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Qabas, hit the news here on July 10, generating a spate of angry denunciations and front-page editorials. It also led to the summoning of the Iranian Charge d'Affaires to the Foreign Ministry for separate protests by Minister of Foreign Affairs Shaikh Khalid and Minister of State Nazar Baharna (a Shia).

¶3. (U) In his statement, Shariatmadari, who is reportedly an advisor to Iranian supreme leader Khamenei, said that "Bahrain is a special case among GCC countries in the Persian Gulf because Bahrain is part of the Iranian territories and had been separated from Iran in light of an illegal settlement between the executed Shah and the governments of the United States and Britain. And the main demand for the Bahrain people is to return its province -- which was separated from Iran -- to the motherland which is Islamic Iran. It is self-evident that Iran and the people of this separated province must not give up this ultimate right." He also reaffirmed Iranian sovereignty over the three UAE islands. Finally, addressing the ruling families of the Gulf countries, he said: "Since they know that the earthquake caused by the Islamic revolution model will lead to the collapse of their illegitimate regimes ..., they become enemies of Islamic Iran...."

¶4. (U) On July 11, FM Shaikh Khalid told the press that Bahrain was waiting for an official response from the Iranian government. Asked if Bahrain was considering withdrawing its

Ambassador from Iran, Shaikh Khalid stated that "at this time Bahrain prefers a diplomatic solution rather than escalating the issue." (Note: Ironically, Bahrain's new Ambassador to Iran Rashid Al-Dossary presented his credentials in Tehran July 10, at which time -- according to Iranian press reports -- President Ahmadinejad emphasized the positive role that friendly ties between the two countries could play.) Meanwhile, Iran's CDA in Bahrain Redha Henroor (the former Ambassador left several months ago and has not yet been replaced) told the press that Iranian Foreign Minister Muttaqi would stop over in Bahrain Friday to meet with FM Shaikh Khalid and to discuss the issue.

¶5. (C) Privately, Bahraini officials have been harsh in their condemnation of the Iranian statement. MFA MinState Baharna called the statement "outrageous," and said the Iranian CDA had little to say in response when called in. Minister of Industry and Commerce Hassan Fakhro noted that this was the first time since independence that a senior Iranian had made such a statement about Bahrain. Minister of Defense Shaikh Khalifa said that it simply reaffirmed what they know about Iran, and its supporters in Bahrain.

¶6. (U) Sunni and Shia political leaders alike have reacted strongly to the statement. Leading Shia political society Al-Wafaq issued a statement stating that the article was "far from the truth, unrealistic, and surprising to everybody. Bahrain is historically Arab. This was emphasized in the 1971 referendum, through which the Bahraini people chose to be an independent Arab Muslim state. Such statements do not serve stability in the region and harm all the region's countries." The head of the Council of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee Adel Moawada (a Salafi) said that the statement could not be considered that of an individual because Shariatmadari represented a big segment of society.

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He announced that his committee would meet July 12 with FM Shaikh Khalid to discuss the issue. Head of Al-Mustaqbil bloc Adel Al-Asoomi demanded that Bahrain expel the Iranian Ambassador, pull out the Bahrain Ambassador from Tehran, and have limited ties with Iran "as long as it has greed towards Bahrain and the region." The Shura Council issued a statement condemning Shariatmadari's "irresponsible statement."

¶7. (SBU) Mansour Al-Jamry, the editor of Bahrain's one Shia-oriented newspaper (Al-Wasat), came under considerable local criticism when his newspaper did not cover the story on the day it broke (the only daily that didn't). In his July 12 commentary, he tried to justify his decision, saying that he thought Shariatmadari's comments were "too ridiculous" to merit coverage and that he preferred to focus on the positive comments of Ahmadinejad during the presentation of credentials of Bahrain's new Ambassador. The issue was Al-Wasat's lead story on July 12.

¶8. (SBU) Otherwise, editorial commentary was consistently harsh. Al-Ayam demanded that Iran clarify its position, finding it strange that it "has not issued a clarification about these unacceptable statements." Al-Watan warned of continued Iranian attempts to gain control over Bahrain. Al-Waqt affirmed that Bahraini Shia and Sunni are not willing to give up their land and their sovereignty. In an apparent dig at Mansour Al-Jamry, columnist Sawsan Al-Shaer wondered "how blood does not boil in the veins of any Bahraini about these statements." Akhbar Al-Khaleej columnist (and Shura Council member) Sameera Rajab predictably argued that Shariatmadari's statement "proves Iran's historical plans and greed in the region and Bahrain."

¶9. (C) Comment: This tempest will surely pass, but the Shariatmadari has hit a particularly sensitive spot for Sunni Bahrainis. It highlights a certain jitteriness in Bahrain about Iran and its intentions in the context of heightened sectarian tensions generated by the war in Iraq, Hizbolah

activity in Lebanon, and Ahmadinejad's aggressive presidency.

At the same time, while the concern and protestations are genuine, the government probably does not mind having the opportunity to drive home the point that its concerns about Iran (and implicitly Shia) are grounded in reality.

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